

**The Novel Studio
Anthology
2020**



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1 *The Hidden Ones*

by **Kathrine Bancroft**

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Sofia, 1969: Lili Alexandrova has just seen the necrolog announcing the death of the brother she last saw in 1943. On the other side of the city, her estranged father Stoyan sits counting down the hours to his son's funeral. Set in 1940s and 1960s Bulgaria, and told through four distinctive voices, this historical family saga takes its inspiration from the little-known fact that Bulgaria's Jews were saved from the Holocaust. But at what cost? And to whom?

As the tram pulls away, she looks out of the grimy window into the gloom and watches as a succession of Lilis refract back at her through the glass. She stares at these images of herself in the same way that, only half an hour before, she'd stared at Grigor's photograph, sitting in the middle of his necrolog. She knows that they're her, in the same way she'd known it was him, even before she'd seen his name and the date of his death. But there is a detachment, a lacuna, that feels impossible to bridge.

She's always hated these death announcements. She'd had a visceral fear of them as a child, forcing her mama to cross the street whenever they came across one. Mama always said that she shouldn't be so disrespectful, and that Lili had more

to fear from the living than the departed, something which she had later found to be true, but there was just something so terrifying about seeing the faces of the dead staring back at you and knowing that they were out there somewhere, on their own, waiting to be placed into the ground. That awful understanding that they were still lingering in this world and were not quite yet of the next.

Even now, as a middle-aged woman, with a husband and daughter waiting for her and the black-market meat that she'd gone to the other side of the city to collect, she'd seen the necrolog and instinctively made to avoid it. But something had stopped her maybe it was the meticulousness of its placement in the middle of the tree, as though whoever'd done it had measured the circumference to get it just right. Or maybe it was because something inside her had been waiting for, and dreading, this day for twenty-five years. She'd always thought it would be her father's face that would one day stare down at her never imagined that it could be Grigor's.

Lili reaches into her bag and takes out the necrolog that she'd earlier ripped off the tree in a gesture so fierce it had startled a wizened baba passing by. The old woman's pale, milky eyes had looked at her in disgust, taking in her nurse's uniform half hidden under a battered woolen coat, before she'd hobbled away, muttering about how much better it had been in the old days when things hadn't been so godless, and so cold.

The paper has ripped along one of its black edges and Lili thinks of the frayed fragment now left hanging on the tree, marking a presence that was once briefly there but which has now departed. Another piece of her family left alone and in limbo, with only the wind for company.

Her hands quiver as she looks at her brother's face. The eyes staring back at her are Mama's. The mouth, set firm and portraiture straight, is her father's. He'd still had the cowlick the one that she and their housekeeper Maria had spent mornings licking their fingers and pressing down on his head to tame, whilst he'd struggled as if were one of the chickens that their dog Bobbi regularly used to torment. They'd nicknamed him Pille, the little chicken, for that but he'd been far too young to understand or appreciate the joke.

Grigor is described as the beloved son of Svetlana and Stoyan Alexandrov, formerly of Menebritsa, now of Sofia. There's no mention of her an absence that isn't surprising but one that still stings, and with a sharpness that makes her gasp. But there is another feeling too. A stirring, a calm, that could almost be called a vindication of hope, or of faith. She'd always believed that they were out there, somewhere in the city, their shadows following her every step. And she'd been right.

2 *The Turning*

by Miranda Blazeby

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In the rural town of Thackett Without, the temperature is rising and eleven year olds, Caro, Max, Merlin, Thomas and Susie have heard rumours. The age of Turn-ing - the end of life process in which humans transform into birds - is getting younger. As adults and societal order are eliminated from their world, the five children begin their struggle to survive, going head to head with an unforgiving climate, and each other.

By the time Max has returned, his school shirt is translucent with sweat. He takes the stairs two at a time to the soundtrack of his mother's cries. She is sitting on the top corridor with her back to the wall. Her hair is matted with blood, a great gash has split her eyebrow and the shoes are missing from her feet. The door to his parents' room stands ajar, a little warped, not quite right on its hinges. He reaches out and pushes it wide open with sweaty fingertips. He sees the bird immediately and flings himself on the floor, arms outstretched, fingers splayed and head bowed the way he had been told to do if he ever saw one. The bird, a large, long-feathered toucan, stands on the sill, tapping the glass of the window softly with its heavy, polished beak. Max recognises at once the familiar sloping nose, the tonic-coloured

eyes. He lifts his head an inch and scans the room. Shreds of bloody tissue, discarded organs and finger bones are cast haphazardly about the room, sprayed outwards by the force of the Turning.

The bird clicks its black-tipped beak in irritation and bends to nibble at the edge of a human ear. Max colours in disgust. I must let it out. He rises onto his elbows and draws forward, a soldier in a ditch. Don't look it in the eye. He keeps his eyes on the ground but the debris is all about him. It is vivid with gore, already turning sticky and pungent in the heat. Don't touch it. Keep your hands away from it. Hurry up. He sweeps away one of his father's fingers, as curled and docile as a prawn. The wet residue of blood is soaking through his trousers and he must stop once or twice as the sweeping tide of nausea overwhelms him. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, but this only sucks more of the smell into his lungs. Finally he reaches the window.

Preoccupied with preening itself, the bird has not noticed his slow progress across the room. Max rises slowly, tenses his arms and pushes up the frame. It screeches upwards, then sticks. The bird makes a soft croaking noise and, out of the corner of his eye, Max sees it turn to face him. Come on. Come on. Come on. He pushes harder but the window won't move. The sweat is thick on his brow and for a moment he curses his delaying father, always promising to fix the car and oil the windows but never doing it. Then he feels it. A hot pain at his elbow and the toucan's beak drawing away, steeped in blood. He cries aloud and moves away from the sill, keeping his eyes on the ground as it approaches. Its feet are clacking angrily against the wooden floorboards.

Max snatches up the marble reading lamp from his father's bedside table, ripping the socket from the wall. For a moment, the bird's eyes widen as it braces for a blow but Max makes a quick sidestep and smashes the window instead. Glass shards glitter and sprinkle onto the floor and Max feels the grating of skin as he hits it again and again. That's it. That's big enough.

He throws himself face-down upon the floor. There is a passing shadow above him. He feels the magnificence of it. Then there is a great downward gust of black-fingered wings, a tinkling of glass and a dark shape moving beyond the window

and through the sky. Max climbs shakily to his feet and watches it. One wing up, one wing down, it glides east into the mountains. Where they all go. He looks down. Thick blood is oozing gently down his fingertips, falling steadily onto the floor. Drop. Drop. Drop. Max rests his head against the cool of the wall. So that's it. He's gone. The man with the tonic-coloured eyes, the kind heart, the procrastinator's soul.

3 *Outskirts of Heaven*

by Nicola Crichton-Brown

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Romantics, Guy and Miriam Armitage, emigrate from London with their daughter, Rachel, to Guy's property in New South Wales, abandoning their professional careers in favour of what they perceive will be a better life on a remote farm. However, the reality proves harder than the dream as Miriam is wracked by debilitating loneliness and ennui whilst the prevailing drought creates extreme stress for Guy. Gradually the change of environment impacts their personalities and relationship sending them on divergent paths of fulfilment and loss.

Miriam could not believe that Guy's panacea for all her problems was a portrait. His conviction that this would make her happy struck her as imbecilic. How could he not see that she was craving something meaningful to occupy her days, not another chance to sit around idly whilst the world carried on around her? What she needed was support, emotional support to find a way through this stifling tunnel. The usual friends on whom she could lean for advice were not only too far away, but from lack of experience, uncomprehending of the vastness of her geographical and social isolation and the impossibility of making Timbarra a part-time commitment. Try as she might, it was hard to explain these problems to people who had not

encountered such difficulties themselves. As for Lisa, her one friend in the district, Miriam was careful how much she divulged for fear of becoming the centre of gossip if she wasn't already.

Miriam did what she would usually do on days when she despaired. She saddled her horse and went for a ride. Leaving the stable yard, she crossed the creek by the windmill and cantered her mare up the slope on the opposite bank to the top of her favourite ridge. It was hot again, but the sun dipped behind some cloud eliminating the burning sensation on her skin. The mare was keen in spite of the heat and unleashed a power in her stride that was exhilarating. Miriam stood up in the stirrups and gave the mare her head, urging her on in the wind and leaving her cares behind. A false sense of release and freedom always accompanied her on these rides that took her deep into the landscape, a contrast to the claustrophobia of the isolated homestead that had become a gilded cage.

From the ridge, Miriam had a sweeping view not only of the ten thousand acres that comprised the farm, but also of the decimated country beyond. She liked this view not only for the low lying hills that encircled Timbarra and the narrow creek that snaked along in the valley below, but for the old Hume highway, a worn and dusty dirt track between Melbourne and Sydney, that stretched as far as the eye could see before it disappeared in a hazy fissure cut into the horizon. The road was historic, punctuated here and there by coaching inns now mostly derelict, and was no longer used except for local traffic. Miriam thought of the thousands of people, many of them destitute, who over almost two centuries had walked or ridden along this road hoping to make a living on the land themselves or from the people who occupied it. She fancied that the hope they carried with them for a new and better life was not dissimilar to her own and it made her feel not quite so much alone.

Turning her mare, Miriam rode along the ridge towards the old cemetery, an overgrown, neglected plot of half a dozen graves surrounded by low cast iron railings. A Kurrajong tree stood in the midst of the headstones whose inscriptions had been erased long ago by the elements and which bore no other distinguishing marks. Miriam wondered vaguely who the poor souls buried here were and the sort of lives they had led. Whoever they were, they had been forgotten, abandoned by

their families and friends, consigned to oblivion. No one could rescue them from obscurity now. She thought of the famous georgic elegy by Thomas Gray about the inevitability of death. Hadn't she learnt it at school? She searched for the lines, but they returned only in fragments, like the former happiness in her marriage. She remembered the warning, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave," yet Guy forged relentlessly ahead with his ambitions as if death could somehow be defied.

4 *Ghostings*

by Helen Ferguson

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Single mum and translator Beth is preparing to meet her latest online dating interest, Vegan Sam. Spanning summers 2019 to 2020, her tales of dating are interwoven with past experiences of marriage breakdown, hearing loss and ghosting in a narrative which injects black humour and lyricism into the acute observation of daily life. Culminating during the pandemic, Ghostings explores how lockdown brings the tensions between distance and intimacy, freedom and constraint into sharper focus.

A milky sourness lingers about the fridge like a haunting. Before going to France for the summer, Beth's mother had left her kefir for babysitting. This despite Beth's notoriously poor pet-sitting record, linked to the death some years ago of all her neighbour's fish. The kefir baby moved in with its paraphernalia: kilner jars, litres of whole milk and written instructions. 'How demanding can it be to keep some yo-ghurt cultures alive?' thought Beth, moving her laptop and a pile of washing from the table to make space. 'Don't let it be the boss of you!' advised her sister from Spain and Whatsapp'ed her a pic of her own kefir in a decidedly grubby looking jar. 'I don't even wash out the jar,' she added unnecessarily.

In her present state of rising panic at the thought of Saturday's date, the milk's

demands push her to the limit. Essentially it requires rotating jars of milk in various stages of fermentation around the kitchen. There is the ‘mother’ standing out on the table, the jug of milk sitting at room temperature for the new batch and the ready jar of kefir chilling in the fridge. There are stark warnings: never stir with a metal spoon! It needs feeding with milk in the morning, while she’s feeding her own children, pouring flakes into bowls, slicing bagels and plaiting hair (not normal plaits of course, but bloody French plaits). Until this point, morning lunch boxes had marked the limit of her tolerance, but now there is soured milk too.

She manages three days. Three mornings of stirring spoonfuls of mother into waiting warm milk, standing it in the fridge, while removing the chilled kefir, whisking in honey and drinking with a pale glow of virtuousness. ‘It’s quite nice really if you don’t mind the lumps,’ she texted Vegan Sam, alongside a photo of her drinking it on the garden bench in the sun. ‘That made me a bit sick in my throat,’ he replied.

On the fourth morning she gets distracted and suddenly panics that she’s muddled up the two jars, unsure which had been on the table and which in the fridge. So she leaves it and watches it grow thicker and separate, a clear liquid collecting at the bottom. She’s already tired of its stronghold over both her kitchen and her day. Repeating to herself the words of her former counsellor that acceptance is a good thing, she feels relief at acknowledging her failure to sustain the kefir. Like the driving, or the pet-sitting, it was just a step too far. She tips the contents of all three jars down the loo. When she tells the kids later that she’s killed Grandma’s kefir, they say Grandma had expected that to happen anyway. ‘Thanks for the confidence everyone!’ she sighs. ‘Don’t worry, Mum,’ responds Iris, without turning away from her programme, ‘at least you’re better at keeping your children alive.’

Hit by the smell as she opens the fridge, she realises that dating a vegan is untenable while her fridge hosts the spirit of a sourly departed kefir. She reaches to the back to pull out some old peppers weeping into their plastic bag and it strikes her like an epiphany that no vegan, especially one who keeps his desk tidy and his shoes in a line, will countenance carnal relations with a woman whose fridge is in this state. So she marks in ‘clean fridge’ above ‘pluck eyebrows’ and ‘tidy bikini

line' on her mental list of pre-date preparations and pulls on rubber gloves.

5 *A Life Worth Living*

by Linda Fripps

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Devastated by his mother's death but released from the confines of her expectations, Father Michael O'Brien questions his ministry. He moves from his rural parish in Ireland to a school chaplaincy in south-east London. Following his intervention in the lives of two vulnerable fifteen-year-olds, Father Michael comes into contact with those involved in gang violence and child abuse. Can the truth be heard above the clamour of prejudice? Can Michael finally find his own place in the world?

All he could think about was the click of the voice recorder and its red light. Asked to confirm his name, he stumbled his way through it. Instructed to repeat it, he coughed to clear his throat and said, 'Michael O'Brien. Father Michael O'Brien.' His eyes flicked from the police officer to the machine and then to his solicitor.

He could well imagine the clucking of tongues and the disgusted sniffing of those who would judge him. No smoke without fire they'd say, eyebrows arched. His culpability a foregone conclusion. Here we go again, they'd say, another Irish Catholic Priest. Is there no end to their wickedness, their perversions?

The officer was speaking or at least Michael thought he was. His mouth was certainly moving and he could see the other policeman nodding, but the man's

voice hadn't reached him yet. Like TV programmes, when the audio and visual are out of sync, he thought. Or it could be that the rushing and roaring in his ears were drowning out all external input. He felt short of breath, as though an iron vice had been clamped around his ribcage. He reached for the plastic cup and tried to sip the tepid water, but it dribbled down his chin and he wiped it away with the back of his trembling hand.

The sergeant remained on mute. Michael stared at his mouth as it rhythmically opened and closed, and panic crashed over him. How could he answer his questions if he couldn't hear him? He shifted his gaze to the clock above the man's head. Michael watched the red second hand's frantic circuit and wondered how long they would keep him there.

School would finish in two hours and the prayer group would make its way to the chapel in dribs and drabs. They'd be able to run the session themselves so they wouldn't be bothering anyone. Emmanuel would be more than happy to lead, unless the girls from St Philomena's turned up.

His face was itchy and he lifted his hand to scratch it, but stopped midway. He remembered that the Head of Year Ten had once told him that he could always tell if a kid was lying as they invariably touched their face. He tried to steady his breathing in an effort to calm down and his thoughts turned to Cecile.

'Calm down, for God's sake!' she'd said to him after a year eleven student had told him to fuck off and called him a paedo priest. The boy had been excluded for five days and his mother had wept, saying that his life was over, that they wouldn't take him in the sixth form at the grammar school now. Michael had felt desperate, knowing that he'd mishandled the situation. It would never have happened with Cecile. She had a way about her. It was like she soaked up agitation and filled the void with peace, just by breathing.

Deep breaths. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Repeat. He could hear her saying this now. He looked behind him, suddenly convinced that she had crept into the room.

'Father O'Brien?'

Michael twisted back round to face the detective. 'Sorry?'

‘What have you to say about these allegations?’

Michael turned to look at his solicitor, expecting a nod of encouragement so he would proceed as she had advised, but the young woman, with her auburn curls and pinched face, remained perfectly still.

He met the detective’s stare and said, ‘No comment.’

This was a neutral response in legal terms, apparently, but that didn’t change the fact that it seemed loaded with guilt. Thank God his mam was dead and buried and spared the humiliation of all this.

6 *Micro*

by Lucian Huxley Smith

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Ben is a world famous DJ used to the perks of his profession, but underneath his bravado there's something seriously lacking. When his most recent dalliance orders her Uber before the zip on her jeans is done up, Ben is forced to confront who he truly is.

Micro is a tragicomic-bildungsroman charting Ben's journey from insecurity to in-famy, questioning how typical notions of masculinity lead men to make decisions damaging to themselves and those closest to them.

Finally, I cum.

That makes one of us.

I shuck my boxers back up, sitting on the end of the bed.

'Thanks,' I pant.

A silence.

'You don't have to...' She sounds serious '...you don't have to thank me.'

'O.K.'

'Yeah.' She says it yah, valley girl style: 'It is O.K. It's O.K. O.K?'

It's clearly not O.K.

The record that began coitus now crackles on its groove and shame, my longest serving friend, joins me once more.

As always, I'm wordless and dry mouthed.

Another silence.

'How much is a cab back to where I'm staying?' she's shuffling her jeans on.

'Bethnal Green, right? Not much.'

'Cool.'

The Uber screen is pulsing before her jeans are over her hips: 'You don't have to go, you know -'

'I know.'

'I'll transfer the money for the cab if it's a -'

'Don't...honestly. It's O.K.'

'OK.'

'Can you stop saying that?'

'Er, yeah, O.K.'

She laughs, maliciously. I'm not the one whose said OK four times though.

'It's booked.'

I did like her, I still do, but it's much of a muchness. It could've worked, but it can't because of...me. Outside, a thick fog has rolled in off the canal-ways. Now, unlike an hour ago when I was stalling before the act, I want to be touched, to be reassured, for Anne to let me know that, despite everything, I don't disgust her.

Instead, we walk a metre apart, Anne swaddled in her black puffer-jacket, me clinging to my flannel shirted sides. The Uber's blurred headlights emerge through the fog. I break the silence: 'So, I'll...see you round?'

'Yeah, yeah...' - she manages a sad smile - '...sure.'

Trying humour, I adopt a Dickensian accent: 'I'll make sure the lady gets in her carriage first though.' She laughs, probably one of pity.

I open the car door and, unexpectedly, she gives me a hug: 'You're not a bad guy, I'm just -' I pull my hand up to stop her. I know this goodbye already.

The inside light of the car shines on her glasses. I realise they've remained on the whole time, sex and all.

‘Let me know if you’re ever in LA.’

Mustering a nod, I close the door and watch the hybrid ghost noiselessly into the last of the night. All the hope, happiness and sunshine of a Hollywood ending disappears with her.

Back in my room I flick my gear on for warmth. I’ll sleep for a few hours then make music to shuffle off the blues. Creative mania is better than sadness after all.

Anne is the first to have taken off that quickly. I’d been expecting it, but there’s normally a hug, if only for ten minutes. Maybe these are my just deserts.

Before sleep, I wrestle the with the same questions as always: should I tell them before? Does it mean they haven’t consented if I haven’t? Should they be accepting of who I am? Should I be proud of who I am? It’s my soul that matters, right? Is going to bed with a woman while my star is risen like this, without telling them, an abuse of power?

I can’t resolve to answer these questions now, but I can resolve to be honest. I’ll start like they do in Alcoholics Anonymous: My name is Ben, I’m thirty two. I’m a world famous DJ, and I have a micropenis.

Now I suppose I’ll have to tell the whole story.

7 *The Colour of Gold*

by **Tamyra Johnson**

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Two years after giving birth to her illegitimate son, Dominican-born Anthelia is forced to leave him, and her homeland, for England, a decision imposed by her father, Esai, in an attempt to hide her shame behind the golden vales of empire. Anthelia is left to confront racial hostilities in the UK, whilst grappling with the loss of motherhood and her father's notion of idealism.

Southampton skies remain the same, regardless of the hope that a new season brings. Whether the leaves turn bright green or the final one makes its wearied cascade to the soil, the sky still spites the broken history of a distant empire.

Anthelia remembers the landscape's formidable strain as her maiden voyage from Dominica came to its crescendo at the English docks, the Queen's docks. All of them, the newly arrived, fought with nerved might to find a place of solace beneath the skies. They thought the smoke which saturated everything above would clear, showing the crown that they were told sat at the top of the land. And the smoke, the heavy weight of the white smoke that plumed from the those brick homes to blemish the sky well surely those were the bakers' roofs but the smell never gave off a hint of yeast just the remnants of something that had burned to the end of its

cycle.

She remembers the state of confused worry that hit many on that ship and wondered if they all confronted something far from the golden images that their fathers, too, had fabled. All of these thoughts bombard Anthelia as she once again gives her weight to the ship's edge, staring past the overcast horizon. The vessel is dense with Islanders returning to their beginnings: some to boast of their new life, others broken by the motherland's shallow promises but her return sits deep in the grey skies, resolute but not resolved.

The deck almost seems to fold under the weight of the human traffic, many dressed in the sharp church blazers of the old world, some combining the striped bell-bottoms and rayon shirts of the new. She decided to meet in the middle wearing red cotton bottoms with a mustard tunic to combat the September clouds. Both sit in the shadow of her jet-black crown that forms a perfect semicircle from one ear to the other. Her afro stands firmly against the elements, though the light wind still tries to tease through it like a farm man splitting cane with his cutlass. It's a quiet sort of provocation that is only seen by those whose bodies were framed for commodities. It began as agitation when her father told her to go to England, distress when he forced her to leave her son behind, a stirring realisation that the golden frames of Britannia could condense the body to debt.

And now, after England has consumed over a decade of Anthelia, she bounds towards her father's Dominica. She grieves into the shoulder of the ship, 'He never took a breath. Him send me far.'

A man to her right peels through his bible - its worn, cracked faade suggesting that the actualities of life are better left to the realms of island dreams. His fingers apply pressure to the coffee-stained pages that arch to his command and are only interrupted when the wind comes in to play.

She watches as his arms extend over the barrier, the bible suspended in the air, wielding its authority over the waves, reducing the crests' energy to the tiniest of movements. He is a figure unnerved, able to deter and dispel anything that questions his faith, a stance with the same scent that surrounds her father and which now bleeds through the deck to submerge her post as the dutiful daughter.

8 *The Swallowed Sun*

by Hamdi Khalif

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*1940-50s rural Somalia. When the youngest of six sisters, Astur, is cut in haste and married to a wealthy merchant at the age of 12, and then later dies during childbirth, the lives of the surviving sisters are irrevocably changed. The eldest, Baar, must now take on Astur's marriage and child. Told through the voices of the sisters, *The Swallowed Sun* is the first novel in a trilogy exploring the lives of three generations of Somali women from colonial Somalia to modern day Britain.*

The shame from the night before seeped through her pores, leaving behind a thin, sticky film. It tasted of sin.

When he was done with her, she curled to the edge of his hut until the tip of her nose pressed against its straw pillars. The pain born between her legs while he was inside her now spread to the rest of her body like a fan to fire. She hadn't noticed she'd been biting her tongue the entire time until she felt it lying swollen inside her mouth, the moment she unclenched her teeth. The other senses returned to her slowly, and as they did, she had the sensation that she wet herself. Too afraid to move in case he wanted her again, she laid still, listening to the gushes of the river and hoping its murmurs would lull her into sleep. Sleep didn't come.

‘When he begins to unwrap his ma’awis, begin to undress too,’ her mother advised, on the eve of her wedding, while her sisters worked the plantation. She had ordered her to stay home in case her nails chipped from hacking weeds or her skin scratched from the shelter belts. ‘And when you’re with him, don’t look him in the eyes otherwise he will think you want it too,’ she added, as if he was even something that Astur could want. He was a heavy man with ants for eyes and wore his moustache thick like the colonisers. He hid a balding crown underneath strands of hair which he combed to his forehead. It was Bilan who first noticed this, just days after his arrival to the village. ‘Shame,’ Astur remembers her saying as she contorted her face, ‘he has nice hair, otherwise.’

Apart from his eyes that sat too far apart on his face, everything else about him was oversized. From his nose and lips, to his stumpy hands and feet. And it was in his belly where most of the fat congregated. Astur recoiled. She didn’t think she could survive another episode of his fat on top of her bones, crushing them into submission. Or unsmell the once sweet scent of mango laden on his breath.

In the morning and after he left, she scratched away the shame that crawled on her skin. She did this ferociously, her nails digging into her soul until they uncovered the pink layer underneath. She looked around his hut, now able to make out the items that were just shapes the night before. It wasn’t sparse like theirs and was instead filled with items, many of which Astur didn’t recognise. There were quilts and pillows everywhere, lined against the inner wall and rolled out on the floor. Astur felt as if she was sitting on air. When she looked down, the sheets underneath were soaked in crimson as if a goat had been sacrificed on them. She jumped up, combing through the sheets and praying her blood didn’t soak through to the bottom. She bundled them together, carefully hiding the stains, and stepped outside in search of water.

The day was betrayingly bright and its light cruel on her skin. The air smelt different too, earthy, and she put it down to the proximity to the river. She longed to return home but that wasn’t an option so she located a bucket to the side of the hut and squashed the sheets inside. Looking for soap and not finding any, she decided to ask the neighbouring hut, lightly tapping on the door. After a long wait,

it was opened slowly and Hasan stood in its frame. He wore a disgusted look and the shame that she scratched away moments before now began to resurface.

9 *Men of Ruin*

by **Alexandra McDermott**

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In 1950s London, PI Stephen Kenward is tasked with establishing which nominee for chairman of a newly-founded peace committee has been denounced in an anonymous letter. To help delve into the candidates' pasts, he recruits a team of typists to infiltrate their various businesses. But the girls' loyalties soon come under strain, and when Stephen unearths a buried crime from the Blitz the investigation takes a deadly turn . . .

London 19th October, 1956

A ruby traffic light loomed out from the fog like a beacon on a mist-bound ship. Elsbeth Rodgers leaned forward, rapping on the partition to the driver's cabin. He wriggled around and slid the panel back a few inches. 'Miss?' His breath clouded on the tarnished glass.

'I'll get out here, thank you.' Elsbeth slid along the fissured leather seat and pushed open the kerbside door.

'You sure, miss?' The cab driver nodded across the road towards Park Square, a vague green mass hemmed in by a shadowy cobweb of wrought-iron fencing. 'It's still a fair step.'

‘That’s all right.’ She stepped to the pavement, counting out her fare. She calculated it to the exact penny, the coins stacked meticulously in a tower of decreasing circumference, then stooped down and passed it through the window to him. She hoped that the tip was all right. At home a sixpence was quite sufficient. But city drivers might expect more.

‘Good day, miss.’ He touched his cap and, as the light flashed to emerald, pulled away into the haze. Elsbeth couldn’t tell if he were displeased or not.

She cuddled the collar of her brown tweed coat up around her throat, hunching her shoulders. The fog had worked its usual silencing magic and the street was very still. She could even hear a tit chattering irritably in the park.

She was glad of the fog. People talk of the anonymity of big cities, but she had not felt it in the days since her arrival. London was like walking through a living art gallery, every human a moveable display, an object for curiosity. Today, the fog cast a shroud of privacy around those happy to face its damp chill.

She headed up the western arc of Park Crescent. Even with the rooftops huddling into the mist like a long white cliff rising into cloud, it was obvious that this sweeping terrace of Georgian architecture had suffered extensive damage during the war. Rebuilding had plugged the gaps left by the bombing, but the new structures didn’t quite fit. It was like trying to cover up nail pricks in the wall of a rented flat by filling them with plaster. It doesn’t hide the fact that you’ve hung pictures; it just seals the holes.

Hallam had warned her. The glamorous London of their parents’ memory was not the city she would be seeing. Hallam knew. He’d been in London for the past four years, working in Fleet Street.

She continued onto the stately expanse of Portland Place which, even on a busy morning, surely could never have seemed frenzied or crowded. Elsbeth shrank further down into her collar. It smelt reassuringly of wood fire and stable-yard hay.

On either side of her, palatial townhouses and embassies stood in aloof ranks, disdainful and full of complacency. What are you doing here, they seemed to say, lifting well-bred eyebrows in polite censure. What was she doing here? She stopped walking. Before her, the Italianate silhouette of the one-time Langham Hotel rose

high and grand against the sky. That meant that the Art Deco building across the street must be Broadcasting House. This is the BBC . . .

She clutched her leatherette handbag to her chest. A superlatively groomed woman came down the steps of the house to her right and walked past her towards Langham Place, the slim heels of her shoes making delicate tsking sounds on the pavement. Elsbeth stared at the round toes of her own block-heeled pumps. How incredibly provincial she must look.

With a shiver, she pushed down her glove to expose her watch. Five minutes to eight. She'd better hurry; it would never do to arrive late her first morning.

10 *The Returnees*

by **Lola Okolosie**

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As the world celebrates the new millennium, brother and sister, Seun and Remi, are thrown into turmoil when separated by immigration bureaucracy. They must search for belonging in Edinburgh and Lagos, cities where they feel out of place and alone.

Where will they find a sense of home and how can they mend their severed relationship?

The Returnees is a literary coming-of-age novel about race, migration and the dream of a new life even in the most hostile of environments.

He surveyed the expressway scene behind him. In the midst of beeps and cars and tankers and lorries and buses, the hawker glided towards him and he wondered how she had managed to remain regal amongst such ugliness. On the top of her head she carried a circular plastic tray with tie-died blue and white effect. Loaded on this were forty or more film bags of roasted groundnuts, tied in the shape of cones. She was young and wiry. With each of her steps she planted her heels down firmly, stretching her calves as she did so. Rooted. From her waist upward she held herself taut. She'd sway as if to counterbalance the movement of the tray, swishing left, extending out a hand if her load threatened to topple. When she did so, she

moved her torso in one line: measured. He imbibed her movements. He'd caught himself doing this sometimes, collecting people whose gait and gestures he revered, wishing he himself had been graced with their elegance.

As she neared, he could make out that her irises were the same brown as her skin, accentuated by the thick black kohl around the almonds of her eyes. Eyes people back home in Bradford would assume were black because they refused to pay attention. Deep and resonant, voluminous and expanding, the opposite of a void. He wasn't hungry but he heard himself say, 'Oya, give me two.'

He delved into his wallet, retrieving notes just as she was passing him the nuts. Here was an opportunity for a seamless exchange. Benga pulled off this kind of thing without ever having to think about it. And that was the problem. He, Seun, hadn't thought but was instead caught on the wings of a whim. He'd forgotten to warn his limbs of what he'd soon be asking them to do. His body and brain needed to converse before they could act in unison for tricky manoeuvres like this. But he hadn't the time.

'20 Niara,' he heard her say and though his hand was only inches away from hers, his stiffness forced him to jerk it forward and outhe lost his grip and the note. Looking, he could see it nestled between a discarded pure water bag and a battered shoe. His eyes met those of the hawker and he was pinned by the steady disgust staring back at him. Rather than retrieve his awkward limb, he instead let it hang out of the window and the hot of the car's exterior seared him.

Benga lurched the car forward before he could tell the girl he was sorry, that he wasn't the sort of man to throw money at a hawker but now warm air from the window slapped his face.

'Please, roll your window up, person die for dis heat. Me, I no want wait in go slow o,' Benga said, keen to be nobody's fool, least of all, Lagos'. Seun did as Benga instructed, winding his window up, replaying the scene. He realised too late (as always) that Benga was driving on the opposite side of the road where traffic flowed more freely.

In the silence, the road swooshed by. They passed a 7Up refilling factory and a KFC, an image whose familiarity struck Seun as out of place. KFC was bargain

buckets on Saturdays, watching *The Price is Right* or *Family Fortunes*, head perched on his hands, lying on his belly beside Remi. It wasn't here, just before the stained khaki faade of Glory Christina Ministries.

11 *Right Promethean Fire*

by Veronica Grace Taleon

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*At a prestigious university in New York City, students Alice and Benedikt are intellectual adversaries who can't seem to stay apart. When Alice renounces food, sleep, and sex in an experiment la Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, their fractious yet affectionate relationship is transformed. As they grapple with their neuroses and unspeakable pasts, a story about rivalry, romance, and the misguided allure of permitting passion to devolve into obsession unfolds within the half-hallowed, half-demonic halls of higher education.*

Alice pulled *Love's Labour's Lost* from her bag, and her aunt asked, "What are you doing?" "Studying," she said, but apparently she did enough of that at school, and could she please relax for the few hours a week she got away? Which got Alice thinking. Never a good thing.

Her mother would've said the opposite. Dark was light and foul was fair to Shakespeare, and likewise for her mother, a chance for repose was an opportunity for activity. As soon as Alice returned to the *Nautilus* from school, or from one of the museums, or from sneaking into a lecture at the university, her mother would hurl a column of assignments before her like it was a pail of slop. Sometimes, she

was Mommy's research serf, and other times, Mommy's student, and by high school, she'd learned, along with her eight languages, not to ask what all the extra hours of education were for. When she was younger, maybe elementary or middle-school aged, her mother had gotten away with saying it was because Alice was ineffably bright. Special, maybe even exceptional, and people who were exceptional lived differently, had their own particular mores and praxes. It wasn't deviant behaviour; it was a right and responsibility to foster the utmost limits of their brilliance and creativity. That was their contribution to the world.

If Alice tried to say that she'd rather fit in with her classmates than this lifestyle, her complaints were clipped by her mother's argument that she'd offend Prospero, Dr. Faustus, the Glasses and Prozorovs, Captain Nemo, every brainiac that'd ever graced the page, if she were to waste her talent on idle evenings and trash television. Her classmates' day may've ended with the knelling of the school bell, but Alice wasn't like them, and her life wasn't afternoon cartoons and Girl Scouts and slumber parties. Not with a brain like hers. She wasn't better, her mother made sure she knew. She was just different. Intellectually exceptional, and exceptionalremember thisin nothing else.

Over the summer, the Headshrinker had asked, "Your mother's lifestyle of extreme intellectualism it's done that much for you?" Perhaps Alice was the lowest of vermin to harbour as narrow-souled a vice as ambition, but the answer was "yes." Qualified, but yes. Growing up, her sisters and aunt had been absent. Friends few and far between. And her mother, for all her strengths, yes, admittedly, sometimes severe. When the world sneered cyanide, or ridiculed in ricin, only the fortresses of Times Roman bibliocracies stepped up to shelter her. Sticks and stones wielded by aggravated mothers may've broken Alice's bones, but words cut like a knife, then bandaged her up afterwards. The weapon used against her could also heal, the hand that strangled feed, and her torturer be a protector.

That's why she told the Headshrinker, "Yes," in response to her question, and, "Yes," to Ned when he'd suggested that she reincarnate Love's Labour's Lost. Yes, a hyperfastidious education had done that much for her, and yes, she was the ideal candidate to renounce food, sleep, and sex because her mother's perverted take on

stoicism had conditioned her to live that way before he'd even suggested it. She could've told Ned that he didn't know what he was talking about, or the Headshrinker that yeah, she would've left her mother to her lonely kingdom of academia if given the second chance, but she hadn't, and she wouldn't. Her mother may've used the full potency of her wit against her. She may've thrown Alice to the bar of rhetoric, rolled her in the salt of debate, and derided her when she failed to live up to expectations, but Alice's education was the only thing she had. Words were her abuser, but also her salvation.

12 *Never Look Away*

by Jonathan Tree

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Never Look Away is the story of two British photo-journalists in a fast changing world. From the fall of the Berlin wall to the fall of the Twin Towers, Frank Carter and MLE compete to be at the very heart of world events. To make sense of the wars, famines and political turmoil they must place themselves in great danger: physical, emotional and moral. Can their friendship survive it?

Three weeks in Chechnya was no picnic. It was February and the weather was shit. Constant freezing rain had replaced the snow, flooding the roads, forming large pools, a bleak landscape of mud and ice. Since the start of the war, there was no-one to clear the ditches and drains. Everyone prayed the rain would stop, but it didn't.

Ten days later walking through a London park, past hordes of daffodils in warm spring sunshine, the thought came, At least the rain washed away the blood. MLE was heading into the office to edit; stepping past mothers with buggies, children chatting and playing. Unbidden, the image of the three Chechen fighters executed by the side of the road came into her head.

They'd heard the sound of a heavy machine gun and the four of them had cut

through a back alley, hoping to avoid getting into the middle of a fire-fight. As they came back to the main street she looked cautiously around the corner. They were lying just five metres away. Freshly slaughtered.

Their executioners had driven away with their little darling mounted on the back of a pickup truck, she could see their tire tracks in the muddy road. The DShK was a heavy machine gun that fired 12.7mm shells at the rate of 600 a minute. They were known ironically, affectionately even, as Dushkas, the Russian word for sweetie, or darling and at close quarters they could make a pretty mess of an armoured car. Using them on living flesh from a few metres away, well, imagine taking a sledgehammer to a watermelon. It was a blood bath, a butcher's shop, a chaos of limbs and organs blown apart, then collapsed under gravity into this pile in front of her. It wasn't even immediately clear how many people this mangled heap of flesh had been. A one second burst of the gun would have done the job, but the shooter had kept going, tearing the bodies to pieces. A hundred empty, shiny shell-casings littered the road. Half a head stuck out of this bloody mess, the entire right side ripped away, the remaining eye, open, staring. A mist was rising off the still warm bodies, in the bitterly cold air, like the vapour coming out of M's mouth once she'd remembered to start breathing again.

Tobi and Jon, American free-lancers she was sharing a fixer with, manoeuvred around her, checking the street for hostiles, weighing up the scene in front of them, before starting to take pictures. "You're in the frame, M. Can you move, please?" Tobi called to her.

She ignored him. Lifting the camera to her face she focused on the dead staring eye of the corpse, it was cornflower blue, but there was no sparkle, no hint of spring. She didn't press the shutter. She froze, just for a second. She shifted her position so as to show some of the wall behind the bodies, splattered with blood and gore; the scars of the steel tipped bullets that had passed so easily through the flesh and bone, had punched holes in the brickwork. The clean-up crew who recovered the bodies later, told her that they were three brothers and that they must have clung together as their executioner opened fire. MLE could still picture the mass of tangled limbs, she could imagine the three brothers hugging each other as they died, embracing

rather than trying to run.

The image in her head walking through London, was not one of the pictures she'd taken that day, rather it was the one she didn't take; that she couldn't take. By the time she entered the agency the blackness of her mood was total, it radiated from her, felt by everyone in the room. MLE was always in control, emotionally contained, now the shutters were slammed firmly down and locked up tight.